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ABSTRACT

Recent organizational changes in the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) as well as the formation of Alaska's Rural Education Attendance Areas (REAAs) have important implications for the education of rural Native American children. The Title XI Education Amendments passed in November, 1978 (P.L. 95-561) aim at solving some of the administrative problems caused by distance, diversity, and isolation of BIA-operated and funded schools. The legislation requires structural changes that will result in: funding (based on an equitable formula) going directly to the school level, allowing for development of programs to meet special student needs and for greater local policy control; more flexible personnel staffing; improved efficiency and communication due to direct line authority from the Office of Indian Education Programs to the schools; and development of uniform policies and procedures as the basis for system planning, development, and evaluation. Thus far, greater local control has resulted from the development of Alaska's REAAs. Local Native Alaskan authorities may choose to transfer their BIA school to the REAA system, contract with BIA to operate the school, or remain in the federal system. Court mandated secondary education is causing small, isolated high schools to proliferate but solutions to that problem are being sought in such options as satellite instruction and regional resource centers. (SB)

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EDUCATION OF INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE CHILDREN IN RURAL AREAS: NEW HORIZONS?

by

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This paper takes a brief look at some structural changes that very recently have occured within two large systems responsible for the education of rural Native American children. The paper will first discuss several organizational changes now being implemented in Bureau of Indian Affairs-operated and funded schools. It will then speculate about the implications of these changes for both equity and quality within the system. The paper will then look at the recent formation of the Rural Education Attendance Areas in Alaska and will discuss their potential for improving the educational opportunities of rural Native children in that state.

Reform by Legislation: A Fresh Chance for BIA Schools

The largest single rural school system in the United States is funded and operated by the Federal government. With 43,000 students in 230 schools located in nearly 20 states, the Department of Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs must deal with unbelieveable problems resulting from distance, isolation and diversity. The majority of Indian and Alaska Native children in the United States attend public school with the total number variously estimated to be from 150,000 to 361,000 children (Jones, 1977). The counts vary so dramatically because of the inadequacy of reporting procedures and because different federal agencies use different definitions of Indian. No reliable estimates are available for the number of Indian children who attend private school or who are not in school at all.

In addition to BIA-operated schools, the federal government through

the Bureau funds 41 tribally operated schools. These schools are financed under the terms of Public Law 93-638 which makes provision for tribal organizations to contract with the Bureau to operate their own schools. Contract schools may be previously BIA-operated, previously private or newly organized drawing their students from existing BIA and public schools.

The BIA system is divided into twelve Areas for the administration of its programs, including education. The Areas are further divided into some 80 Agencies, only about 50 of which operate schools. In the past, education policy in the BIA has been mainly in the hands of the twelve Assistant Area Directors for Education and has varied greatly from Area to Area. School budget development has been a negotiated process involving the BIA central office--the Office of Indian Education, the Assistant Area Director, the Agency Superintendent and the school administrator with each request and each response passing through the successive levels and subject to arbitrary change at each level. The result was a funding system so inequitable that per pupil expenditures ranged from a low of $813 to a high of $13,371 for day schools in 1978 (Odden, 1978). The director of the Office of Indian Education Programs had no authority and little staff which would permit it to engage in activities either to improve school programs or to make the funding system more equitable.

On November 1, 1978, Congress enacted Title XI of the Education Amendments of 1978 (P.L. 95-561). That legislation, the most sweeping of its kind in history, can dramatically improve the quality of

education available to Indian and Alaska Native children in the United States. The law requires the Bureau of Indian Affairs establish:

- o a comprehensive set of uniform policies and procedures;
- o a new personnel system which permits the Bureau to hire school staff members from outside the costly and restrictive civil service system;
- o direct line authority from the director of the Office of Indian Education Programs to the schools;
- o a policy-making role for boards of education in BIA schools;
- o an equitable formula funding system which allots funds directly to each school; and
- o standards for all BIA educational programs and facilities.

These changes in the way the system is organized and how it is operated have several important implications for improving practice.

1. The new funding formula will distribute funds based on the number of students and the severity of their needs and will require that programs exist to address those needs. This means that whether or not programs for special student needs improve, they at least will be more widely available. It also means that schools will have an incentive to recruit students not presently in school, particularly those with the greatest educatiinal needs since they generate the most income under the formula.
2. Funding will be equitable which will allow in previously underfunded schools to offer enriched programs.

3. The new formula will distribute funds directly to the school level where the local school budget will now be developed and administered. This means that critical aspects of policy making, decision making and control will pass into the hands of local communities. It also means that Agency operations will become more service oriented since funds will be controlled by the schools. Agencies will contract to provide services at the pleasure of the schools.
4. Direct line authority will exist from the Assistant Secretary for the BIA to the Director, OIEP and through the Agency school superintendents to the local school boards and administrators. This will mean increased efficiency in administration, improved lines of communication, clearer lines of authority and responsibility, and a more responsive system for presenting staff development and other technical assistance to schools.
5. The new personnel system will offer greater opportunity and flexibility in staffing BIA schools. Local communities will not be required to hire from civil service rolls which means vacancies can be filled more promptly and from a wider range of applicants. It also means local school boards can waive Indian preference requirements in hiring. The inability to staff fully and with high quality persons has been a major impediment to improving the quality of BIA schools in the past.

6. The existence of uniform policies, procedures and standards will provide a solid basis for planning, developing and evaluating improved programs for the entire system.

The implementation of P.L. 95-561 and the subsequent changes in the system will be one of the most important developments for the Federal government to observe, document and evaluate in the coming years.

Coping with Isolation: Can the REAAs Improve Education for Rural Alaska Native Children

Weather, distance and geography combine to isolate much of rural Alaska, with many communities accessible only by light plane. Rural schools are extremely small and the more remote were operated until recently either by the Alaska Department of Education or the Bureau of Indian Affairs. However, in recent years there have been significant changes in how educational services have been delivered to children in rural Alaska.

The State of Alaska has accepted the responsibility of educating all children within the state, including Alaska Native children. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, however, continues to run a federal school system within the state, operating under the policy and standards of the Department of Education. Forty-two day schools and one secondary boarding school are operated by the BIA in Alaska at this time. Since 1946 seventy-eight Bureau schools have been transferred to state operation at local option under a joint policy called "mutual readiness." The mechanism for the transfer is a contract under provisions of the Johnson O'Malley Act which commits the State to operate the school and the Federal

government to pay a large share of the cost.

In 1971 the Alaska Legislature passed a bill which created the Alaska State-Operated School System. The law transferred responsibility for operation of the more remote, predominately Native schools from the Department of Education to the new separate State-Operated system. The purpose was to provide more local control for the communities it served. Although the Alaska State-Operated School System had its own board, there were only seven members to represent 133 schools across a vast geographic area having a diverse population. By 1976 the State-Operated System had been replaced first by the Unorganized Borough School District and then by a system of 21 Rural Education Attendance Areas which still exist. Each REAA is comprised of several schools and has a representative Board of Education with the same powers and duties except taxing authority as those in the city and borough school districts. The REAAs are new and are still experiencing growing pains, but they represent a giant stride toward local control of rural schools in Alaska.

Local communities in Alaska with BIA schools now have a range of options available: they can transfer their school to a REAA, they can contract with the BIA to operate their own school under P.L. 93-638 or they can remain within the Federal system. With the REAAs in their infancy and the BIA-operated and contract schools soon to go under a new system of funding, the criteria for local choice is not now clear and probably will not be for at least two years.

One thing is clear, however, more attention is being given and more money is being spent on the education of rural Natives in Alaska than ever before. Per pupil spending has increased rapidly since oil revenues have begun to enrich the state. An elaborate cost of services differential has been applied to education across the state. Since accessibility is a major factor in increasing costs, the remote rural areas have benefitted most.

High school education remains a difficult problem in rural Alaska. Until the 1970s, high school education for most rural Native children was not available near their homes. Although some local high schools existed, most secondary students attended the BIA boarding school at Sitka (still in operation) and some were sent to boarding school in Oregon or even as far away as Oklahoma. Many did not attend high school at all.

The Tobeluk State Supreme Court case in 1976 resulted in an agreement by consent of the State Board of Education to provide a high school in any local community which has an elementary school unless the community specifically asks that there be no high school. The State Education Department and the local communities are still struggling to find realistic ways of putting that decision into operation. The result, of course, is the proliferation of many very small high schools, and not much is known about how to organize and operate such small units to provide high quality instruction. Program options being tested to supplement local programs are instruction by satellite and short term boarding sessions for specialized instruction. Tremendous opportunities

exist for experimentation with organization and programming of small high schools.

Alaska has also recently established a series of regional education service agencies called Regional Resource Centers which provide shared services to some of the remote schools. Only five are operating at this time and they provide only a limited array of services. State support at this time is minimal with only $350,000 in state funds being spent on the Centers in 1978. The potential for these units providing needed services to rural schools is great, however, judging from the experience of other states.

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